DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 354 767 FL 020 986

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TITLE Language Freedom and Restriction: A Historical Approach to the Official Language Controversy.
PUB DATE Jun 89
NOTE 15p.; In: Reyhner, Jon, Ed. Effective Language Education Practices and Native Language Survival. Proceedings of the Annual International Native American Language Issues Institute (9th, Billings, Montana, June 8-9, 1989); see ED 342 512.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *American Indian Languages; Bilingualism; *English; Ethnic Groups; *Language Dominance; Minority Groups; *Official Languages; Patriotism; *Second Languages; *United States History
IDENTIFIERS English Only Movement

ABSTRACT

The major threat to Native languages embodied in the "English Only" movement is discussed and ways that the United States historically has allowed language freedom is documented. The following points are made: (1) contrary to myth, the United States has never been a monolingual country; (2) for most of U.S. history, the dominant federal policy on languages has been one of tolerance and accommodation; (3) recognition of minority language rights was reflected in the bilingual and non-English-language schooling that was commonplace in many localities until the World War I era; (4) U.S. liberation policy on language has not always been upheld, especially toward indigenous and conquered peoples, colonized groups, and racial minorities; and (5) it was in the first two decades of the 20th century, the "Americanization" era, that an ideological link was forged between English-speaking ability and American patriotism, and conversely, between speaking other languages and disloyalty to the United States. It is concluded that the country has always been marked by considerable language diversity, that language laws have been rejected as a threat to individual liberties, that language restrictions have trampled basic constitutional rights and produced ethnic strife, and that language conflicts have never been fundamentally about language per se. These arguments rebut the claim that English has been a great unifying force in American history. Contains 35 references. (LB)

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Language Freedom and Restriction: A Historical Approach to the Official Language Controversy

James Crawford

Does the United States need an official language? In a recent national survey, nearly two-thirds of respondents assumed that English already enjoyed official recognition in the United States Constitution (Associated Press, 1987). On learning otherwise, many Americans respond: Why not? From 1981 to 1988, fourteen states recognized English through statutes or constitutional amendments, for a total of sixteen Official English states.[1]

Meanwhile, a movement is growing for an English Language Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Voters and legislators tend to view such declarations as symbolic and benign. They ask: Why not recognize in law the reality that English is our national language, which all Americans need to know -- and should know -- to prosper economically and to participate as full citizens of this country?

Perhaps a better question would be: If the United States has gotten by without an official tongue for two hundred

[1]Nebraska and Illinois had already adopted such measures. A seventeenth state, Hawaii, is sometimes counted in the Official English column because of its 1978 constitutional amendment declaring English and Native Hawaiian as official languages. But this policy of official bilingualism is diametrically opposed to the "English Only" thrust of other Official English legislation. For example, Arizona's 1988 amendment reads in part: "This State and all political subdivisions of this State shall act in English and no other language" (Crawford, 1989).

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years, why does it need one now? An English Language Amendment was first introduced by then-Senator S. I. Hayakawa. Never before had a national Official English declaration been proposed in any form (Marshall, 1986).[1] Was this an oversight? Or were there well-considered reasons for rejecting language legislation?

U.S. English, the lobby behind the Official English campaign, offers the following answer: "It is a shared language that has allowed us to rise above our differences and come together as citizens of one nation. ... In the past, we functioned quite well with a *laissez-faire* policy on language [because] ... there was no resistance to the notion that learning English was the price of immigration." Today, however, there is a growing threat to English as "our common bond," owing to an unprecedented "drive for public recognition of other languages." New programs like bilingual education encourage minorities to maintain their native tongues rather than to learn English. "All we have to do is look at our neighbor to the North to see the kind of conflicts language differences can engender." Therefore, English needs "legal protection" (U.S. English, 1987).

Because these assertions echo the mythology of the Melting Pot, as well as pervasive misconceptions about language, they often go unchallenged. But none is supported by the historical record. In fact, a history of U.S. language policy -- or lack of one -- both undercuts the rationale for Official English and provides cautionary lessons about proposals to restrict minority languages.

In interpreting that history, I would advance the following theses:

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[1]The only previous official-language measure considered by the U.S. Congress was a 1923 proposal to designate "American" as the national tongue. Sponsored by Rep. Washington J. McCormick, a Montana Republican, the bill was an open attack on literary Anglophiles. It died in committee, but a similar law was adopted by the state of Illinois, where sympathy for the Irish Revolution was strong among legislators (Mencken, 1985). Illinois dropped "American" in favor of English as its official language in 1969.

1. Contrary to myth, the United States has never been a basically monolingual country. While one out of eight U.S. residents reported a language background other than English in 1976, this diversity is nothing new (Ferguson & Heath, 1981). Some linguists believe that the United States has been the home of more bilinguals than any other nation in world history (Haugen, 1969). As early as 1664, when the colony of New Netherland was acquired by the British, eighteen different languages were spoken on Manhattan Island (Hansen, 1940), not counting Native American tongues which numbered more than 500 in North America at the time (Castellanos, 1983).

From their writings, we know that early leaders like Thomas Jefferson prided themselves on their ability to read several languages and urged educated citizens to study them as well (Heath, 1981). But bilingualism, and often trilingualism, seem to have been equally common at the other end of the social scale -- for example, among slaves and indentured servants, both black and white. Advertisements for runaways placed in mid-18th century newspapers made frequent reference to their proficiencies in German, French, Spanish, Irish and Dutch. Conversely, servants who were monolingual in English were so identified, as if that was something unusual or noteworthy (Read, 1937).

As far as numbers go, unfortunately there is less than optimal data on the languages spoken by Americans, then or now. But we do know that the German-speaking population was sizable at the time of the American Revolution, amounting to one-third to one-half of the white residents of Pennsylvania (Graeff, 1942). In the 1790 Census, German Americans comprised 9.6 per cent of the population in the original thirteen states (American Council of Learned Societies, 1931). By comparison, the U.S. Census Bureau (1987) estimates that Hispanics represent 7.9 per cent today.

And so, there was considerable language diversity in the United States even before the massive immigration that began after 1830 and the massive territorial expansion into lands populated by non-English-speakers -- Louisiana, Florida, the

Southwest, Oregon, Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines.

2. For most of U.S. history, the dominant federal policy on language has been one of tolerance and accommodation. Despite the language diversity that existed in 1787, the Framers took no steps to protect or promote English in the U.S. Constitution. Because discussions were held in secret and we must rely on James Madison's informal notes, it is unclear whether language issues came up during the Federal Convention in Philadelphia (Farrand, 1913). But evidence strongly suggests that our early leaders regarded language laws of any kind as a threat to civil liberties. A few years previously, the Continental Congress had spurned a proposal by John Adams to establish an "American Academy for refining, improving, and ascertaining the English Language" (Adams, 1780). According to Shirley Brice Heath (1976), the consensus was that a democratic government had no business telling the people how to talk, that language choices should be left to the individual.

And so, the founders of this country made, in Heath's words, "a deliberate choice of a *policy not to have a policy*" on language (emphasis in original). That is, they chose to deal with language issues on an *ad hoc* basis. Often this meant accommodating non-English-speakers by publishing government documents in their languages, especially German and French (Kloss, 1977). It was not until 1906 that English-speaking ability became a requirement for naturalization as a U.S. citizen (Ueda, 1980).

This is not to say there was no concern about the persistence of ethnic enclaves. Benjamin Franklin became an outspoken critic of the Pennsylvania Germans, accusing them of resisting English and arrogantly preserving their own culture: "Why should the *Palatine Boors* be suffered to swarm into our Settlements, and by herding together, establish their Language and Manners, to the Exclusion of ours? Why should *Pennsylvania*, founded by the *English*, become a Colony of *Aliens*, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them?" (Read, 1937). Elsewhere Franklin (1753) warned that the colonial Assembly

would soon have to employ translators "to tell one half of our legislators what the other half say," and he objected to bilingual advertising and street signs in Philadelphia.

Fortunately, this intolerant view, which Franklin later regretted, was the exception among our early leaders. His fellow Pennsylvanian Benjamin Rush also hoped to assimilate the Germans, but favored a more democratic approach: bilingual higher education. A federally funded German College, Rush argued, would "open the eyes of the Germans to a sense of the importance and utility of the English language and become perhaps the **only possible means**, consistent with their liberty, of spreading a knowledge of the English language among them" (Heath, 1976; emphasis in original). It was clear to Rush that national unity could not be coerced. He recognized that the Germans would gradually learn English, on a voluntary basis, if provided sufficient opportunities to do so.

3. Recognition of minority language rights was reflected in bilingual and non-English-language schooling, which were commonplace in many localities until the World War I era. In 1710 British missionaries were invited to establish schools among the Iroquois Confederacy, with the stipulation that students had to be instructed in their native tongue. Parts of the Bible translated into the Mohawk language were among the texts used. In 1802, Congress initiated a yearly appropriation ($15,000) to promote "civilization among the aborigines." This money went to missionary schools, many of which appear to have been bilingual. Again religious conversion was the overriding goal of these schools at this point -- not cultural assimilation -- and so missionaries were willing to use the most effective medium of instruction -- native languages (Macias, 1984).

An 1824 treaty with the Cherokee nation specified: "It is further agreed by the United States to pay $1,000 toward the purchase of a Printing Press and Types to aid towards the Cherokees in the progress of education and to benefit and enlighten them as people *in their own language*" (Leibowitz, 1971; emphasis added). This enabled the tribe to publish the

first newspaper in a Native American language, *The Cherokee Phoenix*, using Sequoyah's syllabary.

The treaty was soon abrogated by the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which led to the infamous Trail of Tears, with all southeastern tribes forcibly relocated to Oklahoma. (When the Cherokees used their press to organize resistance, it was confiscated by the state of Georgia.) And yet, the development of the Cherokee language continued. In Oklahoma the tribe established a system of twenty-one bilingual schools and two academies, achieving a ninety per cent literacy rate in Cherokee and a literacy rate in English higher than that of white settlers in Texas and Arkansas (Special Subcommittee on Indian Education, 1969). The Choctaws, Creeks, and Seminoles also established their own schools.

Among other language groups, bilingual education also became widespread in the Nineteenth Century. A dozen states passed laws authorizing bilingual public schools, and they operated unofficially in many other jurisdictions -- in German, French, Spanish, Norwegian, Polish -- wherever speakers of these languages commanded political clout (Castellanos, 1983).

Generally speaking, native-language schooling owed its existence to parents' determination to preserve their ancestral cultures. And this was especially true among German Americans, who even had a word for this ethic -- *Deutschtum*, or German-ness. There was a sizable German element that was unabashed about resisting assimilation, especially in rural areas of the Midwest and Texas (Hawgood, 1940). According to Heinz Kloss (1977), in 1900 there were 600,000 American elementary-school children, public and parochial, receiving part or all of their instruction through the German language. That represented about four per cent of total elementary-school enrollment.

Also around this time came the first conflicts over minority languages in schools. In the late 1880's, states began to pass laws mandating English as the sole language of instruction. In Wisconsin an English Only statute -- known (prophetically?) as the Bennett law -- was aimed in large part against Catholic parochial schools, which often operated in German

(Leibowitz, 1974). In other words, language discrimination served as a convenient tool of religious bigotry.

4. Our libertarian policy on language -- like most democratic ideals of this country -- has not always been upheld. And it was especially not upheld in policies toward indigenous and conquered peoples, colonized groups and racial minorities. Nineteenth Century attitudes toward their language rights were considerably less tolerant than, say, toward speakers of German, French, or Scandinavian languages.

California's first state constitution in 1849 recognized a range of rights for Spanish-speakers -- for example, the translation of public documents and legislative proceedings -- but these were soon eroded as the Gold Rush swelled the state's English-speaking population. In 1855 California's legislature ordered public schools to hold classes exclusively in English. And when the constitution was rewritten in 1879 at a time of intense nativism -- especially toward the Chinese -- all minority language rights were stricken (Macias, 1984).

Meanwhile, Native American languages were targeted for extinction as part of a federal policy of cultural genocide. The 1868 Indian Peace Commission made a number of recommendations on how to subjugate Western tribes. It concluded: "In the difference of language today lies two-thirds of our trouble. ... Schools should be established which children would be required to attend; their barbarous dialects would be blotted out and the English language substituted. ... Through sameness of language is produced sameness of sentiment, and thought; customs and habits are moulded and assimilated in the same way" (Atkins, 1887). The English Only policy was resisted strongly by the missionary schools, which had long operated bilingually. President Ulysses S. Grant condemned the missionaries for insisting on teaching in native languages, and the federal government threatened to cut off their funding (Leibowitz, 1971).

And so, the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs school system originated, with its emphasis on coercive English instruction. Beginning in 1879, Indian children were placed in boarding schools far from their reservations, with

the goal of eradicating their ancestral cultures. Students were forced to adopt white styles of dress, to practice Christian religions and to use English at all times. Typically, the first word of English these children learned was "soap," because that's what was used to wash out their mouths when they were caught speaking their native languages (Campbell, 1988). By 1886, federal Indian education funds were reserved exclusively for English-language instruction.

At the turn of the century, the U.S. government imposed English as the language of instruction in its new colonies of Hawaii, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico (Leibowitz, 1969). Again, the idea was to pacify the natives and bestow on them the blessings of Anglo-American culture and language -- whether they wanted them or not. This policy was a dismal failure in cultivating English proficiency, but it succeeded in making a shambles out of the schools. In Puerto Rico it set off decades of social strife, in which lives were lost, lasting until Spanish was finally restored as the language of instruction in the late 1940's (Language Policy Task Force, 1978). Soon this colonial mentality began to turn inward, and for the first time, the languages of immigrants were targeted for repression on a large scale.

5. It was in the first two decades of the Twentieth Century, the "Americanization" era, that an ideological link was forged between English-speaking ability and American patriotism -- and conversely, between speaking other languages and disloyalty to this country. By 1900 there were growing complaints about both the quantity and quality of immigrants -- particularly fears that newcomers from Eastern and Southern Europe were unable or unwilling to assimilate into American culture. In 1911 a massive federal report on immigration by the Dillingham Commission accused these so-called "new immigrants" -- Italians, Jews, and Slavs -- of failing to learn English as quickly as the Germans and Scandinavians of the Nineteenth Century (Hartmann, 1948).

Meanwhile, big industrialists were fearful of the influence of foreign labor agitators. In the militant Lawrence textile strike of 1912, the Industrial Workers of the World conducted strike meetings in up to twenty languages (Boyer &

Morais, 1955). And so, the Americanization campaign was born, first as a way to offer adult English instruction, but increasingly as a coercive effort to indoctrinate immigrants with "free enterprise" values and "100 per cent Americanism." Factory owners like Henry Ford, along with several state legislatures, made attendance at Americanization classes a condition of employment for foreign-born workers. Learning English became an emblem of the immigrant's new loyalties (Higham, 1988).

The Americanization campaign would probably have gained limited influence had it not been for a historical coincidence: the United States entered World War I in 1917, at a time when German Americans remained visible as a distinct group, proud of their heritage and their native language. Fears about the disloyalty of these so-called "hyphenated Americans" were fanned by ex-President Theodore Roosevelt, among others. Speaking German came to be regarded as giving symbolic aid and comfort to the enemy, if not engaging in outright subversion (Wittke, 1936). Several states enacted statutes or issued emergency orders that savaged the First Amendment -- banning the German language on the street, in religious services, on the telephone, and of course, in the schools. By 1921, nearly 18,000 Midwesterners had been charged under these laws abridging free speech (Rippley, 1976).

The assault was not confined to German. A "patriotic" society headed by Roosevelt declared in 1917: "We must have but one flag. We must also have but one language... We cannot tolerate any attempt to oppose or supplant the language and culture that has come down to us from the builders of this Republic with the language and culture of any European country... We call upon all loyal and unadulterated Americans to man the trenches against the enemy within our gates" (Roosevelt, 1917).

In the year following the war, fifteen states passed laws mandating English as the language of instruction; several went so far as to prohibit the teaching of foreign languages in the elementary grades. The most extreme of these statutes were struck down in 1923 by the U.S. Supreme Court in the *Meyer v. Nebraska* case. Robert Meyer, a parochial school

teacher, was charged with the crime of teaching a Bible story in German to a 10-year-old child (Leibowitz, 1969). While the law was ruled unconstitutional, the *Meyer* decision[1] came too late to save bilingual education, which virtually disappeared for half a century -- until it was resurrected in Dade County, Florida, in the early 1960's.

About the same time, the Americanization campaign expired, not because of the Supreme Court's action, but because in 1924 Congress enacted the strictest immigration quotas in U.S. history. This legislation, which was justified explicitly on the basis of excluding ethnic and racial groups deemed to be genetically inferior, sharply restricted the flow of Eastern and Southern Europeans and totally excluded Asians (Higham, 1988). With the demographic threat gone, there was no longer a perceived language threat; accordingly, coercive efforts to teach English also disappeared.

Of course, immigrants did learn English -- not because of any laws, but because they saw it in their interest to do so. And that process continues today. Despite the claims of English Only proponents, research shows that newcomers are learning English faster than ever before. For example, Calvin Veltman (1988) concludes that Hispanic immigrants to the U.S. are now approaching a two-generation model of language shift -- that is, of becoming dominant in English -- as compared with the three-generation model typical of immigrants at the turn of the century.

To summarize:

-The United States has always been marked by considerable language diversity, as reflected in the

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[1]A similar case struck down Hawaii's attempt to ban Japanese-language schools. Echoing *Meyer*, the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals reasoned that "no doubt the Japanese will be slow to give up their customs and their ideals; but we took the Islands *cum onere* and extended the Constitution of the United States there, and every American citizen has the right to invoke its protection. You cannot make good citizens by oppression, or by a denial of constitutional rights" (Leibowitz, 1969).

long tradition of bilingual education, while English maintained its dominant position. Clearly, our national language is no more threatened today than it was in 1776 or 1917.

-For much of U.S. history, language laws were rejected as a threat to individual liberties. The ability to speak English was regarded as less crucial to American identity than agreement with the democratic principles on which the country was founded, including freedom of speech.

-When language restrictions were enacted, they trampled basic constitutional rights, produced ethnic strife, and sabotaged educational programs.

-Fundamentally, language conflicts were never about language per se. Denial of language rights served variously as an instrument of anti-Catholic prejudice in the Midwest, land theft in the Southwest, cultural genocide against Indians, colonial domination in Puerto Rico, the exploitation of labor on the mainland, wartime jingoism, and the campaign for immigration restrictions.

This list makes it especially absurd to claim that English has been a great unifying force in American history. A good case could be made for the opposite conclusion -- which would be equally absurd. Language has served as a tool, not a cause, of social conflict.

It is no accident that today's attempts to restrict languages other than English occur at a time of rising immigration and empowerment by racial minorities.[1] While

[1]Dr. John Tanton, the founder and former chairman of U.S. English, warns of a Hispanic political takeover in the United States through immigration and high birthrates: "Perhaps this is the first instance in which those with their pants up are going to get caught by those with their pants down. ...As whites see their power and control over their lives declining, will they simply go quietly into the night? Or will there be an explosion? ... We are building a deadly disunity" (Crawford, 1989).

explicit racial politics are no longer acceptable in American life, language politics remain legitimate. For many supporters of Official English, there is no sinister, hidden agenda. But for others, the campaign for Anglo-conformity functions as a surrogate: a way to vent racial hostilities, to limit immigration from the Third World, to preserve the supremacy of white Americans, and to do all these things while wrapping themselves in the flag.

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